

# Strange Tales about Sea Serpents

**Many reliable eyewitnesses over the centuries have reported bizarre encounters with monstrous 'sea serpents'.**

**Are these reports really descriptions of the plesiosaur and ichthyosaur, living underwater relics of the age of dinosaurs?**

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There is a general disposition to regard the sea serpent as an everlasting joke. 'He' only turns up, say the jokers, when the silly season arrives with its prize gooseberries and showers of frogs. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the sea serpent is a living fact, and there is evidence that great living creatures yet unclassified by science inhabit the sea.

The Norwegian fishermen of the past regarded the existence of the sea serpent as something beyond all dispute, and a Norwegian travel book published in the 16th century reports its appearance in the year 1522. Olaus Magnus described the sea serpent as being 200 feet long and 20 feet in circumference, having fiery eyes and a short mane.

Hans Egede, who later became a bishop, travelled to Greenland in the year 1734 as a missionary. In his account of the voyage, he described a sea monster which appeared near the ship on 6 July:

"Its head, when raised, was on a level with our main-top. Its snout was long and sharp, and it blew water almost like a whale; it had large broad paws or paddles; its body was covered with scales; its skin was rough and uneven; in other respects it was a serpent; and when it dived, the end of its tail, which was raised in the air, seemed to be a full ship's length from its body."

Erik Pontoppidan, the Bishop of Bergen and a famous Norwegian naturalist, was sceptical of sea serpents but confessed his conversion in his book of 1755 after receiving reliable evidence. He stated that the creatures kept to the bottom of the sea except during spawning in July and August when they rose to the surface. He discriminated between the Greenland and Norwegian sea snakes—the former being scaly, and the latter being perfectly smooth with a mane about the neck, hanging like a bunch of seaweed. He estimated the serpents at about 600 feet in length. They had high, broad foreheads, though some had sharp snouts and others flat. The eyes were large and bluish, and the skin dark-brown or patchy.

The *Zoologist* for the year 1847 contained many accounts of the appearance of sea serpents in the Norwegian fjords, but one of the most famous and best authenticated appearances of a sea monster was recorded by HMS *Doedalus* in 1848. The official report by Captain M'Quhae to Admiral Sir W. H. Gage follows:

"Sir, In reply to your letter requiring information as to the truth of a statement, published in the *Times* newspaper, of a sea serpent of extraordinary dimensions having been seen from Her Majesty's Ship *Doedalus*, under my command, in her passage from the East Indies, I have the honour to acquaint you, for the information of my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, that at 5 o'clock p.m., on 6th August last, in latitude 24 degrees 44' S. and longitude 9 degrees 22' E., the weather dark and cloudy, wind fresh from the N.W., with a long ocean swell from the S.W., the ship on a port tack, heading N.E. by N., something very unusual was seen by Mr. Sartoris, midshipman, rapidly approaching the ship from before the beam. The circumstance was immediately reported by him to the officer of the watch, Lieutenant Edgar Drummond, with whom, and Mr. William Barrett, the master, I was at the time walking the quarter-deck. The ship's company were at supper.

"On our attention being called to the object, it was discovered to be an enormous serpent, with head and shoulders kept about four feet constantly above the surface of the sea; and, as nearly as we could approximate by comparing it with the length of what our maintop-sail yard would show in the water, there was at the very least 60 feet of the animal à fleur d'eau, no portion of which was, in our perception, used in propelling it through the water, either by vertical or horizontal undulation. It passed rapidly, but so close under our lee quarter that, had it been a man of my acquaintance, I should have easily recognised his

features with the naked eye; and it did not, either in approaching the ship or after it had passed our wake, deviate in the slightest degree from its course to the S.W., which it held on at the pace of from 12 to 15 miles per hour, apparently on some determined purpose. The diameter of the serpent was about fifteen or sixteen inches behind the head, which was, without any doubt, that of a snake; and it was never, during the 20 minutes that it continued in sight of our glasses, once below the surface of the water; its colour, a dark brown with yellowish white about the throat. It had no fins, but something like the mane of a horse, or rather a bunch of seaweed, washed about its back. It was seen by the quartermaster, the boatswain's mate, and the man at the wheel in addition to myself and officers above mentioned."

This is unassailable evidence from the best source possible—the observation of several educated men used to the sea, and set down in a sober, official report. A letter was printed shortly afterwards in the *Globe* newspaper, giving an account of the appearance of a similar monster seen from the American brig *Daphne*, 20 degrees further south, soon after it was seen from the *Doedalus*.

Captain W. H. Nelson, of the American ship *Sacramento*, reported catching a glimpse of a strange sea-monster on 30 July 1877, on latitude 31°59'N, longitude 37°W. John Hart, the man at the wheel, had a better view than Captain Nelson, for he was the one who first caught sight of the creature and the Captain did not arrive upon deck until it had proceeded some distance. Some 40 feet of the creature was seen above the surface, and its girth appeared to be about that of a flour barrel. Indeed, it resembled an ichthyosaur.

An account from an officer of HMS *Plumber* ran as follows:

"On the morning of 31st December 1848, lat. 41 degrees 13' N., and long. 12 degrees 31' W., being nearly due west of Oporto, I saw a long, black creature with a sharp head, moving slowly, I should think about two knots, through the water, in a north-westerly direction, there being a fresh breeze at the time and some sea on. I could not ascertain its exact length, but its back was 20 feet, if not more, above the water, and its head, as near as I could judge, from 6 feet to 8 feet. I had not the time to make a closer

observation, as the ship was going six knots through the water, her head E. half S. and S.S.E. The creature moved across our wake, towards a merchant barque on our lee-quarter and on the port tack. I was in hopes she would have seen it also. The officers and men saw it, and [those] who have served in parts of the world adjacent to whale and seal fisheries and have seen them in the water, declare they have never seen or heard of any creature bearing the slightest resemblance to the one we saw. There was something on its back that appeared like a mane, and, as it moved through the water, it kept washing about; but before I could examine it closely it was too far astern."

The following account of a sea serpent was communicated to the *Illustrated London News* on 25 September 1853:

"We hand you the following extract from the log-book of our ship *Princess*, Captain A. K. N. Tremaine, in London Docks, 15th instant, from China, viz.: "Tuesday, July 8th, 1853; latitude (accurate) 34.56 degrees S.; longitude (accurate) 18.14 degrees E. At 1 p.m. saw a very large fish, with a head like a walrus, and twelve fins similar to those of the blackfish, but turned the contrary way. The back was from 20 feet to 30 feet long; also a great length of tail. It is not improbable that this monster has been taken for the great sea-serpent. Fired and hit it near the head with rifle ball. At eight, fresh wind and fine."

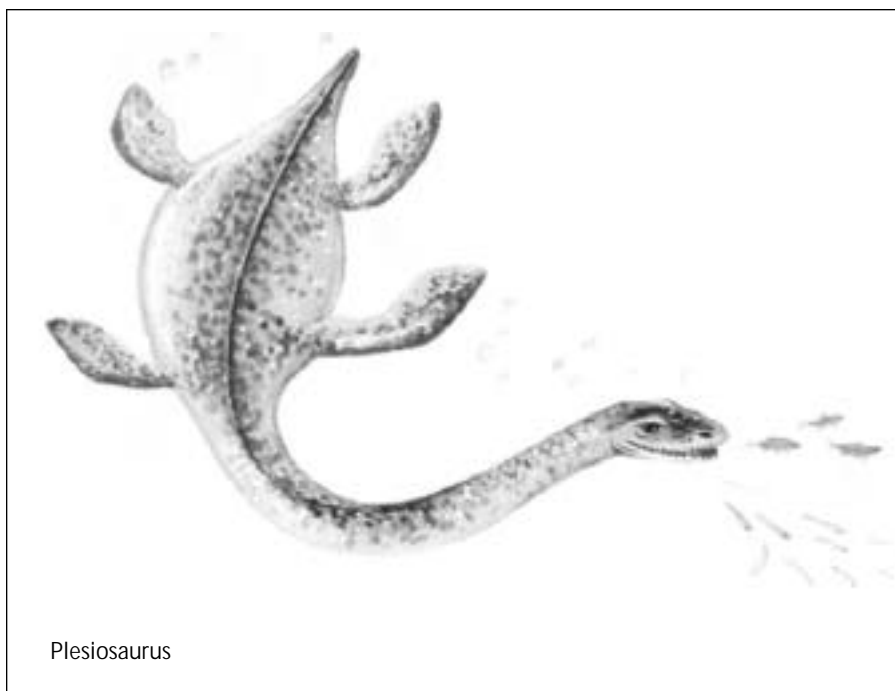
The monster was seen by the entire ship's crew, and also by Captain Morgan, a passenger.

Another sea-serpent was seen by Dr Biccard, of Cape Town, in February 1857, and again, a month later, by Mr Fairbridge and others. Dr Biccard was at the lighthouse at Green Point at about 5 pm in the afternoon of the day in question, when he was summoned by the lighthouse keeper, and the following account is in his own words:

"I proceeded to the lighthouse and from thence I saw on the water, about 150 yards from the shore, a serpent. I borrowed a rifle from Mr. Hall (the father-in-law of the lighthouse keeper), and fired at the animal. The ball fell short in front of it by about four yards. The animal did not move, and then I fired a second shot, the ball striking about one foot or one-and-a-half feet from it. The serpent then, apparently startled, moved from its position, and straightened himself out, and went under water, evidently getting out of the way. He was invisible about ten minutes, at the expiration of which interval he reappeared about 200 yards distant, and, I should say, about 40 yards farther off. He then came right on towards the place where I first saw him; but before arriving there, my son, who had joined me, fired at the animal. Unluckily the discharge broke the nipple of the rifle, and I was thus prevented from further firing. Upon reaching the place which he first occupied, and then stood right into the bay, and soon afterwards we lost sight of him altogether."

The animal was about 200 feet in length, and the head was indistinct. The body was of a dull, dark colour, except the head which was maculated with white spots. The water at that time was very calm, and the creature was seen by eight persons in all.

A young sea-serpent was actually caught and dissected by members of the Linnaean Society of Boston. Due to a number of reports of great sea-serpents seen during the



Plesiosaurus

month of August 1817 in the harbour of Gloucester, Massachusetts, the Linnaean Society appointed a committee to collect evidence with regard to the existence and appearance of such an animal. Shortly after, a report appeared, and a month later a young sea-serpent was actually caught. It was named *Scoliopterus Atlanticus*, and was killed on the seashore near Cape Ann. Following the dissection, a pamphlet was published giving details.

In its issue of 19 April 1879, the *Graphic* gave an illustration of a sea serpent seen by its correspondent, Major H. W. J. Senior, of the Bengal Staff Corps, together with a description of the monster, as it appeared to him from the poop deck of the Steamship *City of Baltimore*, on latitude 12°28'N, longitude 43°52'E. Major Senior first saw the creature about three-quarters of a mile distant, "darting rapidly out of the water and splashing in again, with a noise distinctly audible", and rapidly approaching the ship. It got within 500 yards before changing course and finally disappearing. It moved so quickly that it could not be viewed through the telescope, and no one was sure if it had scales or not. Major Senior also reported the following:

"The head and neck, about two feet in diameter, rose out of the water to a height of about twenty or thirty feet, and the monster opened its jaws wide as it rose, and closed them again as it lowered its head and darted forward for a dive, reappearing almost immediately some hundred yards ahead. The body was not visible at all, and must have been some depth under water, as the disturbance on the surface was too slight to attract notice, although occasionally a splash was seen at some distance behind the head. The shape of the head was not unlike pictures of the dragon I have often seen, with a bulldog appearance of the forehead and eyebrow. When the monster had drawn its head sufficiently out of the water, it let itself drop, as it were, like a huge log of wood, prior to darting forward under water."

Dr Hall, the ship's surgeon, and Miss Greenfield, a passenger, also saw the creature.

Much ridicule was cast upon the story of the sea serpent seen by Captain Drevar and the crew of the barque *Pauline*. The account runs as follows:

"Barque *Pauline*—July 8th, 1875; lat. 5 degrees 13' S., long. 35 degrees W.; Cape Roque, northeast corner of Brazil, distant twenty miles at 11 a.m.

"The weather fine and clear, the wind and sea moderate, observed some black spots on the water and a whitish pillar, about 35 feet high, above them. At first I took it all to be breakers, as the sea was splashing up fountain-like about them, and the pillar, a pinnacle rock bleached with the sun; but the pillar fell with a splash and a similar one rose. They rose and fell alternately in quick succession, and good glasses showed me it was a monster sea-serpent coiled twice round a large sperm whale. The head and tail parts, each about 30 feet long, were acting as levers, twisting itself and the victim around with great velocity. They sank out of sight about every two minutes, coming to the surface still revolving, and the struggles of the whale and two other whales that were near, frantic with excitement, made the sea in this vicinity like a boiling caldron, and a loud and confused noise was distinctly heard. This strange occurrence lasted some fifteen minutes, and finished with the tail portion of the whale being elevated straight in the air, then waving backwards and forwards and lashing the water furiously in the last death struggle, when the whole body disappeared from our view, going down head foremost

towards the bottom, where, no doubt, it was gorged at the serpents leisure...

"Allowing for two coils round the whale, I think the serpent was about 160 feet or 170 feet long and 7 feet or 8 feet in girth. It was in colour much like a conger eel, and the head, from the mouth being always open, appeared the largest part of the body...

"At 7 a.m., July 13th, in the same latitude, and some eighty miles east of San Roque, I was astonished to see the same or a similar monster. It was throwing its head and about 40 feet of its body in a horizontal position out of the water, as it passed onwards by the stern of our vessel...

"I was startled by a cry of 'There it is again,' and, a short distance to leeward, elevated some 60 feet in the air, was the great leviathan, grimly looking towards the vessel...

"A vessel, about three years ago, was dragged over by some sea-monster in the Indian Ocean."

Due to the sheer number of doubters of such an outrageous story, the Captain, accompanied by a number of his officers and crew, appeared before Mr Raffles, stipendiary magistrate, at the Dale Street Police Court, Liverpool, and made a declaration. This shorter account was then signed by George Drevar, Horatio Thompson, Henderson Landello, Owen Baker and William Lewan. In all, three declarations were made, one for each sighting.

Captain Hassel, of the barque *St. Olaf*, from Newport, two days before her arrival at Galveston, Texas, on 13 May 1872, saw a large sea-serpent lying on the surface of the water. Seventy feet of it were visible and it had four fins along the back. It was about six feet in diameter, and was of a greenish-yellow colour with brownish spots over the upper part.



In June 1877, the officers and crew of the Royal yacht *Osborne* encountered a sea monster off the coast of Sicily. Lieutenant Haynes described it thus:

"My attention was first called by seeing a long row of fins appearing above the surface of the water at a distance of about 200 yards from the ship, and away on our beam. They were of irregular heights and extending about 30 feet or 40 feet in line. In a few seconds they disappeared, giving place to the forepart of the monster. By this time it had passed astern, swimming in an opposite direction to that we were steering, and as we were passing through the water at ten-and-a-half knots I could only get a view of it 'end on'. The head was bullet-shaped, and quite 6 feet thick, the neck narrow, and its head was occasionally thrown back out of the water, remaining there for a few seconds at a time. It was very broad across the back or shoulders, about 15 feet or 20 feet, and the flappers appeared to have a semi-revolving motion, which seemed to paddle the monster along. They were about 15 feet in length. From the top of the head to the part of the body where it became immersed, I should consider 50 feet, and that seemed about one-third of the whole length. All this part was smooth, resembling a seal. I cannot account for the fins, unless they were on the back below where it was immersed."

Captain R. J. Cringle, of the Steamship *Umfuli*, one of the ten vessels of the Natal Line belonging to Bullard, King and Company, entered the following in the ship's log:

"SS. *Umfuli*, Monday, Dec. 4th, 1893, 5.30 p.m., lat. 23 deg. N., long. 18 deg. W. — Sighted and passed, about 500 yards from ship, a monster fish of serpentine shape, about 80 feet long, with shining skin, and short fins, about 20 feet apart, on the back; in circumference, about the dimensions of a full-sized whale."

The position indicated was off the coast of Africa, a little south of the Canary Islands. When questioned further, the captain said that all his crew and the passengers had seen it. He had this to add:

"...and this thing, whatever it was, was in sight for over half an hour. In fact, we did not lose sight of it until darkness came on.

"When we first saw it I estimated that it would be about 400 yards away. It was rushing through the water at great speed, and was throwing water from her bows. I saw full 15 feet of its head and neck on three occasions. They appeared and disappeared three times. The body was all the time visible."

After likening the body to a hundred-ton gun partly submerged, with three distinct humps or swellings above the waves, he then continued:

"The base, or body, from which the neck sprang was much thicker than the neck itself... I turned the ship round to get closer to it, and got much nearer than we were at first; but the sun was setting."

The creature appeared to have smooth skin, and was dark brown in colour. The ship was so near it at one time that a passenger, Mr Kennealy, said he could hear the creature hiss, but the first officer claimed that the sound was nothing but the noise from the water at the bows. Mr Kennealy may have immortalised himself if only he had taken the trouble to use the camera he had on board.

Dr Farquhar Matheson, of London, had a still closer view of a similar creature. This happened in September 1893 while Dr

Matheson was sailing with his wife on Loch Alsh which separates the Island of Skye from the mainland. His own account runs as follows:

"The time was between one and two when suddenly I saw something rise out of the Loch in front of us, a long, straight, neck-like thing as tall as my mast.

"It was then 200 yards away and was moving towards us. Then it began to draw its neck down, and I saw clearly that it was a large sea-monster of the saurian type, I should think. It was brown in colour, shining, and with a sort of ruffle at the junction of the head and neck. I can think of nothing to which to compare it so well as the head and neck of the giraffe, only the neck was much longer, and the head was not set upon the neck like that of a giraffe; that is, it was not so much at right angles to it as a continuation of it in the same line. It moved its head from side to side, and I saw the reflection of the light from its wet skin."

Dr Matheson saw no scales on the creature, just a perfectly smooth surface. It was in sight for about two minutes and then disappeared. Then it rose again three different times, at intervals of two or three minutes. It stood perpendicularly out of the water and seemed to look round.

"When it appeared the second time it was going from us, and was travelling at a great rate. It was going in the direction of the northern outlet of the Loch, and we were sailing in its wake; I was interested, and followed it. From its first to its last appearance we travelled a mile, and the last time we saw it it was about a mile away.

"I saw no body, only a ripple of the water where the line of the body should be. I should judge, however, that there must have been a large base of body to

support such a neck... An eel could not lift up its body like that, nor could a snake."

Despite suggestions that it was an optical illusion, Dr Matheson and his wife stuck to the story.

Curiously, Dr Matheson's description of the sea serpent sounds surprisingly close to that of a periscope. When it came to submarines, at that time Britain lagged far behind the rest of the world, but France, Germany and America were all investing large sums in their development. Could that long neck and head, that turned this way and that, possibly have been the periscope of a foreign submarine doing a little spying?

#### References

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#### About the Author:

C. D. Pollard is a former second-hand book dealer turned full-time writer, whose articles and short stories have been published in over 30 magazines in the UK, France, USA and, now, Australia and New Zealand. His first book, *Classic Tastes*, part of a series, is due to be published by Pipers' Ash Ltd, UK, in late 1997.

Mr Pollard has a peculiar obsession with the Victorian and Edwardian periods, particularly with rare literature and some of the more unusual goings-on of those times, be they Fortean or just plain eccentric. Working from his base in a small English village on the edge The Black Country, his aim is to rekindle the public's interest in many of these strange stories.

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